

Self-Transformation as the American Dream in *The Biggest Loser*, *What Not to Wear*, and *Extreme Makeover*

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by

Allison Haste

Thesis Advisor

Joyce Huff

Signed

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

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Abstract

The desire for personal growth and transformation has always been the backbone of the American Dream. Americans are infatuated with the idea of self-transformation because it is considered a noble desire that embodies the American Dream and the quest for upward mobility. This analysis of three makeover reality television shows, *The Biggest Loser*, *What Not to Wear*, and *Extreme Makeover*, critiques the ways in which the American Dream has been warped into the desire for physical transformation and the quest for the ideal body.

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Allison Haste

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Introduction

Americans are obsessed with the idea of self-transformation. We can see this desire for personal transformation woven into the deepest parts of our culture. The quest for personal transformation is aligned with the American Dream—that we can change our circumstances with enough hard work. We want to believe that there is always the possibility for a “rags to riches” story with ourselves as the protagonist.

We see the body as the ultimate symbol of personal transformation—if you can change your body, you can change anything. Although there may be obstacles in the way of what a person can change in regards to their economic status, career, or living situation, one thing that someone feels that they have absolute control over is the body. The body is the one thing that people feel that they have total ownership of, and have the choice to do what they please with it.

Additionally, changing the body also has a profound visual aspect of transformation. Changing the body indicates personal transformation because people can see the transformation for themselves. Self-transformation suggests growth and change, things

that are highly valued in our culture. The journey of self-transformation mirrors that of the American Dream because both suggest that one can always change personal circumstances with enough desire, hard work, and willpower. However, our society has taken the pursuit of happiness and forged it into the pursuit for the ideal body.

This idea is reflected in reality television shows such as *The Biggest Loser*, *Extreme Makeover*, and *What Not to Wear*, all of which center on the pursuit of bodily transformation. These shows demonstrate how our culture has taken the pursuit of happiness into the quest for the ideal self. Each of these shows encourages personal transformation of the body—whether it is by losing weight, getting plastic surgery, or by simply changing clothes. They all promote the idea that changing the body is indicative, or even caused by, an internal change that leads to a better, happier life.

In this paper, I will explore the quest for personal transformation, using NBC's *The Biggest Loser*, ABC's *Extreme Makeover*, and TLC's *What Not to Wear* as a lens through which we view personal transformation in our society.

Why Do We Desire Transformation?

The Biggest Loser, *Extreme Makeover*, and *What Not to Wear* all focus on aspects of a person's body that "should" be changed. Whether it is because that person is fat, dresses outlandishly, or has some sort of physical difference that makes him or her "other" from the norm, the end goal of the show is to guide that person into a more slender, better dressed, and more attractive version of his or herself. This transformation is meant to remove someone's "flaws" and turn them into the ideal.

Much of the desire for personal transformation that is seen in these reality television shows is the desire to eliminate a stigmatizing condition from the body. Stigma is the social disgrace and disapproval that is placed on a person because of a characteristic that places him or her outside of the norm. There are several different characteristics of which people project stigma. There are "abominations of the body" (Goffman 205), such as physical difference and disability, as well as "blemishes of individual character" (Goffman 205). Additionally, stigma is placed on those who are of a minority race, nationality, or religion. Many contestants on makeover television shows mention that they want to change because of the way they are treated by other people, not necessarily because they want to change for themselves. The quest for a personal transformation that is seen in these makeover television shows is often rooted in the individual's desire to not be stigmatized, rather than a personal desire to change.

A characteristic that is portrayed negatively in *The Biggest Loser*, *What Not to Wear*, and *Extreme Makeover* is fatness. In *The Biggest Loser* and *Extreme Makeover*, a contestant's personal transformation is considered incomplete until he or she has slimmed down. In *What Not to Wear*, even though the contestants are not blatantly told to lose weight, fat contestants are taught how to dress in a way that makes them appear as slender as possible. In each of these shows, fat is stigmatized and seen as an "abomination of the body" as well as a fault in an individual's character. Abominations of the body can be either ascribed or achieved stigmas. Ascribed stigmas are conditions that people are either born with, or that cannot be changed, such as dwarfism or blindness. Being fat however, is considered an achieved stigma, meaning that it is acquired (or seen by others as being acquired), and viewed by many people as something that can possibly be eliminated.

Although there may be preexisting health conditions that could cause someone to be fat, or that could considerably influence a person's body weight, most people assume that a fat person is fat because of the choices that he or she makes, without considering the possibility that a person could be fat due to a health condition or illness. Many studies suggest that the "attribution of responsibility plays a crucial role in forming negative stereotypes" (Yoo 297). People who are thought to deserve the stigma placed on them are often judged more harshly than people with ascribed stigmas. In other words, people are quicker to judge a fat person than someone with what they perceive to be an ascribed stigma because they see fat people as having control over being fat (Backstrom). Regardless of whether or not a person's weight is actually ascribed or achieved, people still treat being fat as something that a person always has control over.

Additionally, stigma is placed on individuals who are perceived as having "weak will, domineering or unnatural passions" (Goffman 205). Because it is believed that others have control over their weight, fatness is seen as representative of gluttony in excess and "weak will." People are stigmatized for both having an abomination of the body and for having a perceived flaw in character for this reason. In our culture, the idea that body size is indicative of moral character is prevalent. Fatness is looked at as a visual representation of over-indulgence, even if that is not necessarily the case. Fat people are seen as "weak willed" simply for the reason that they are fat, and have failed to correct that "abomination of the body." This mindset is very prevalent in makeover reality television shows. Because these shows purport that people can change their bodies if they set their mind to it, the idea that fat people are simply choosing not to lose weight is maintained.

In addition to the physical change that contestants in *The Biggest Loser*, *What Not to Wear*, and *Extreme Makeover* go through, these shows also promote the idea that physical change catalyzes a change within someone's personality as well. The narrative behind these shows supports the idea that a person's real personality can only shine through once he or she sheds the stigmatized condition. In each of these shows, contestants are believed to not be living up to their full potential because their true self is being hidden by some sort of physical difference. Interestingly enough, these people are considered to not truly be themselves until they conform to what society agrees to be acceptable. According to these shows, conformity is what allows people to have the confidence to be the truest version of themselves. In this way, a person's physical transformation encourages a change in personality as well.

Alternatively, *The Biggest Loser*, *What Not to Wear*, and *Extreme Makeover* also suggest that what is needed to make a physical transformation is a change in attitude. All someone needs to have in order to transform is the desire to change. *The Biggest Loser* suggests that the contestants' willpower is what sets them apart from other fat people who do not lose weight. *What Not to Wear* and *Extreme Makeover* both imply that all that is needed in order to have a complete transformation is to let someone who knows better to intervene and allow the transformation to happen. This mental change allows for someone to begin a physical transformation, and the physical transformation allows him or her to become the person that was always there hiding beneath the "pre-transformed" body.

Cultural History of Changing the Body

The most common practice in self-transformation that is prevalent in our culture is dieting. Americans have a long tradition of dieting that began in the 1800s, although it did

not exactly have the same purpose as it does for many today. Although today dieting is meant to combat fatness, in the past dieting was a way to demonstrate moral rectitude. The first recorded dieters in the United States were followers of Reverend Sylvester Graham, who believed that gluttony could be taken away by following a wholesome diet void of spices and flavor. According to Graham, flavorful food encouraged gluttony, which lead to "indigestion, illness, sexual excess, social disruption and, ultimately, civic disorder" (23 Schwartz). Grahamites exhibit the first known instance of Americans knowing their exact weight and weighing themselves on a regular basis; they were also the first to consistently eat weighed portions of food (27 Schwartz). Unlike today's diets, where the goal is to eliminate fat, Graham's diet was meant to rectify a gluttonous society—slimming the body could result from Graham's diet, but that was not the end goal of his diet plan. Graham's diet plan is also the first example of Americans dieting to achieve a personal metamorphosis. Following Graham's diet plan gave people a sense of change from the outside in—eating bland food in strict moderation would lead people away from gluttony and sin and into a robust, controllable body. The appeal of Graham's diet was that people would be able to control their sinful urges by controlling their bodies.

While dieting began as a form of moral restraint that manifested itself in the body, it eventually changed into a type of physical restraint that somehow denotes moral character. At first, diets were not concerned with how the body looked as a result of the dietary changes—a physical change was merely a side effect of the diet plan. Although a slim body could be seen as an indicator of moral character, a fat body did not necessarily indicate corrupt character. Now however, the purpose of dieting is to lose weight, and the act of losing weight is demonstrative of superior self-control—rather than the other way around

as was the belief of the past. In his book, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat*, Hillel Schwartz asserts that "Americans have taken the protocols of slimming as the protocols for social and spiritual renewal" (5). Americans have decided that changing the body through dieting is indicative of not only a physical transformation, but a mental and spiritual one as well. As a society, we are preoccupied with dieting because dieting carries with it the fantasy of being able to transform oneself into a new person (Schwartz 4). Through dieting, people believe that they can change themselves in body, mind, and spirit.

Today, our cultural expectations of diets have altered. There is a significant amount of credible research that backs up the claim that dieting does not often work in the long term (Roost 175). Instead, dieting creates a "cycle of shame, isolation, and failure" as those who desperately want to lose weight are unable to sustain their weight loss, feel isolated as a result of their continued stigmatization, and continue to not achieve the desired result as they follow a diet that is likely destined to fail from the beginning (Roost 175). Even with this understanding that dieting does not always work, dieting is appealing because it carries with it the possibility of transformation. Each new diet contains the fantasy of permanent transformation, even if this fantasy is understood to be out of reach.

While dieting is the most prevalent way to change oneself in American culture, *Extreme Makeover* and *What Not to Wear* explore other ways that a person might decide to change. *Extreme Makeover* leans toward the more drastic side of transformation, as the contestants often get plastic surgery in addition to losing weight, and then completing their transformation with new clothes and a new hairstyle. *What Not to Wear* suggests that the contestant only needs to change her clothes in order to change herself and her outlook on

life. Although these ways of transforming oneself seem quite different, each of them carries with it the fantasy that a transformed body will lead to a transformed life.

Framing the Transformation

The Biggest Loser

The show follows the lives of several people in a competition to lose the most weight and win a cash prize, thus becoming “the biggest loser.” On the first episode, the contestants are moved to a ranch where they stay for the duration of the show, or until they are voted off the show by their teammates. The contestants are also split into two groups, each with their own trainer with a differing weight-loss philosophy. The show capitalizes on the dehumanizing depictions of the contestants, who are often referred to as “losers” by their trainers as well as one another. Even the title of the show belittles the contestants; if a contestant is succeeding in the competition, he or she is still chastised and considered a “loser.” The opening sequence of the show first features clips of fat people doing various exercises while the camera focuses on one body part at a time. This footage is deliberately objectifying because it focuses only on the contestants’ body parts, rather than treating them as people. Meanwhile, the viewer hears a voiceover of people saying that they hate particular body parts, or that they are unhappy because they are fat. This is followed by a different voice asking, “how bad do you want it?” and “do you have the willpower?” (“Week One”).

Before the first weigh in on the show, there are several scenes that focus on the contestants’ eating habits before they began *The Biggest Loser*. This includes several unflattering close-ups on the contestants’ faces while they eat foods such as chips, cupcakes, and pizza. Then, the contestants strip down to small shorts and tank tops or

sports bras while they wait to be weighed for the first time. At this time, the camera slowly pans over each of the contestant's exposed midsections, leaving their faces out of the frame. The contestants take turns going up a short flight of stairs to the scale to be weighed. When the heaviest contestants walk up the stairs, the viewer hears a drum beating in time with that person's footsteps, as though the contestant is so heavy that the viewer can actually hear their footsteps as they walk up the stairs. After this scene, one contestant mentions that he "feels like a slab of meat" ("Week One"). These scenes in succession tell the viewer to focus on body of the contestant, rather than the person.

The Biggest Loser focuses on the personal struggle involved in transforming the body. The narrative carried throughout the show is that the contestants' bodies are projects that can be fixed up with the proper amount of willpower and work. The viewers accept this kind of narrative because it is ingrained so deeply in our culture. We believe that in order to make a change, what is needed is the desire to change and enough willpower to pull oneself up by the bootstraps to make it happen. The success of the show relies on the fact that the audience accepts this narrative, or at least that they are willing to suspend their disbelief for long enough to enjoy the show.

Even though viewers may *know* that *The Biggest Loser* does not depict a realistic way to lose weight, this is not a meaningful piece of knowledge because the overarching narrative behind the show still prevails. Much like with advertising, the viewer knows that the images depicted on screen are not reality, yet it is the constructed image that sticks with the viewer, not "knowledge" that the image is not reality. When people look at a photograph or a video, they are compelled to believe that it is depicting the truth because "photographs seem to be transparent windows onto reality that ensnare truth. But like all

representations, photographs organize our perceptions, shaping the objects as they depict them by using conventions of presentation that invoke cultural ideas and expectations" (Garland-Thomson 57-58). In the same way, people who watch *The Biggest Loser*, *What Not to Wear*, or *Extreme Makeover* are inclined to believe the stereotypes that the show promotes because the producers of the show are aware of the way they can twist the viewers' perception of the contestants.

As Susan Bordo concludes in her book, *Unbearable Weight*, "It is the created image that has the hold on our most vibrant, immediate sense of what *is*, of what matters, of what we must pursue for ourselves" ("Hunger as Ideology" 104). When viewers see the contestants on *The Biggest Loser* lose hundreds of pounds, it is the visual change from fat to thin that stays with the viewers and trumps the common knowledge that losing weight so quickly is not only unrealistic, but also unhealthy. Although the average viewer understands that the show perpetuates a fantasy of losing weight and keeping it off, this is not the message that the viewer ends up taking away from the show. If this knowledge that *The Biggest Loser* merely promotes a fantasy were *applicable* knowledge, then there would be considerably less desire to chase the idea of this kind of self-transformation. In this way, *The Biggest Loser* promotes the idea that drastic personal transformation is possible with enough hard work, even though that is not necessarily what happens when the cameras are not rolling.

What *The Biggest Loser* promotes is that anyone can lose weight with hard work—what they leave out of the show is that there will always be people who have the desire to change and work hard for it, yet are still unable to experience the complete transformation that the show promotes. The audience is left with the impression that hard work always

results in the desired transformation because there are no depictions on the show of anyone who works hard and is still unable to lose weight. The show also brushes under the rug anything that may suggest that the contestants have to do anything unhealthy in order to achieve their desired transformation. Several former contestants of *The Biggest Loser* have spoken out about the unhealthy situations they were placed in during their time spent on the show. One contestant from Season Three, Kai Hibbard, spoke to news outlet *The New York Post* about her experience on *The Biggest Loser*. She states that there were several occasions when she or other contestants on the show were injured from over exercising and told by a doctor to rest, but the production team told them that they were not allowed to rest if they wanted to stay on the show (Callahan). Hibbard also mentions that her hair started falling out and she stopped menstruating, and also that she had trouble with her short term memory as a result of the unhealthy weight loss tactics promoted by the show (Callahan). Yet, even with these examples of people being injured or in poor health as a result of being on the show, *The Biggest Loser* still promotes the idea that the dramatic weight loss transformation that occurs on the show is life saving for the contestants.

In the first episode of *The Biggest Loser*, the viewers are introduced to the contestants for that season. The contestants are immediately immersed in their new environment where they drastically change their diet and exercise routine. The overall tone of the episode is very condescending toward the contestants, with trainer Jillian Michaels even telling the contestants, "my goal here is to teach you guys how to live" ("Week One"). The contestants are treated as though they are depending on the trainers in order to achieve a life saving transformation. When the trainers belittle the contestants' pain, it is treated as though they are doing the contestants a favor by making them exercise

to the point of vomiting or injury. However, many of the contestants seem to welcome the hope of the transformation no matter how difficult the process may be. Kelly, one contestant who makes it to the finale of the show, claims that her "life is going to change forever from this point on" ("Week One"). The overall narrative of the show is that the trainers are saving fat people by teaching them "how to live" and facilitating their weight loss transformation, as long as the participants have the willpower to do everything that the trainers tell them to do.

By the finale of season one, there are three contestants, Kelly, Ryan, and Gary, left in the competition to be "the biggest loser." In this episode, the remaining contestants leave the ranch where they had lived for the duration of the show and are allowed to go back home to their families. The challenge for the contestants is to continue to lose weight while they are at home and away from the watchful eye of their trainers. The episode shows each of the contestants reuniting with their families after being away for three months at the ranch. The contestants had not seen their families since starting the show, and the episode mostly focuses on the reaction that the contestants get from their friends and family after losing so much weight. The viewer also sees how the contestants adjust to their lives off the ranch, and the struggles that the contestants face as they try to lose weight without the constant supervision of their trainers.

The episode begins with flashbacks to the beginning of the season, showing each of the contestants at their heaviest weight. The treatment of the contestants from the first episode is very different from how they are treated in the final episode. The flashbacks feature the contestants talking about why they wanted to lose weight, and things that they believed they were missing out on because of their weight. Ryan, the overall winner of *The*

Biggest Loser, remarks, "I thought I was destined to be a big, fat tub of goo until I died." ("Season One Finale"). These scenes are meant to show the personal growth that the contestants go through as they go from being fat to thin. What these scenes also show is the way that the contestants are taught to see themselves for being fat. The audience hears the self-loathing in the contestants' voices as they talk about themselves before they lost weight. The contestants mention things such as being self-conscious and having difficulty dating as a result of being fat. After losing weight, the contestants talk about how they are finally able to do the things that they could not do before because they were fat. All of the contestants look poorly upon themselves before losing weight, and they are encouraged to continue to see their "before" bodies this way as motivation not to backslide on their diets. The audience can see the way that even the contestants themselves believe that they deserve the mistreatment and shame that they experience. This attitude makes the audience feel as though they have permission to see the contestants, and other fat people, this way as well. The show suggests that if the contestant feels like he or she deserves to be stigmatized, the audience is free to continue to stigmatize them as well. *The Biggest Loser* focuses on the contestants who strongly internalize the negative stereotypes placed on them because it allows the show to continue to promote these stereotypes.

The flashbacks from the beginning of the episode specifically emphasize the difference in the way that the contestants are treated from the beginning of the season to the end of the season. There are several clips of the contestants from the beginning of the season eating food, where the scene is brought into slow motion. The focus is entirely on the contestant's mouth as he or she eats, with the camera zooming in and slowing down as the person chews. This is meant to project the idea that a fat person eating is disgusting.

This way of filming the contestants as they eat is completely done away with once the contestant shown is no longer fat. There is a scene in which Gary goes out to eat at a restaurant with his family after he returns from the ranch. The focus is no longer on Gary's face as he chews the food, nor is the footage slowed down to emphasize him putting food in his mouth. Once the contestants have lost weight, the camera does not emphasize them eating as though it is a disgusting thing. This is one way that *The Biggest Loser* changes the way it treats the contestants after their transformation from fat to thin.

There is a clear difference in the way that the contestants are treated based on their gender. In the first episode, Kelly remarks, "if I lost the weight and was more comfortable with myself, having someone love me and loving someone will be so much easier" ("Week One"). In the season finale, Kelly goes on a date. It suggests that Kelly would not be able to find someone to date her if she would have not lost weight. However, Ryan and Gary, the other two contestants do not comment on not being able to find someone to date because of being fat. Additionally, there is much more focus on the way that Kelly looks than the way that the two male contestants look after losing weight. When Kelly returns to her family, several people exclaim that she looks beautiful. Her mother says, "I know it's Kelly but I look at her and I think can this really be her? Can this really have been the transformation? I mean it's like she's a gorgeous butterfly ready to take off. She's gorgeous" ("Season One Finale"). Other friends and family members make similar remarks; all focused on how beautiful Kelly looks after losing weight. When Gary and Ryan are reunited with their families, several people comment on how good they each look after losing weight. However, both of their families focus more on how healthy Gary and Ryan are because they lost weight. Gary's wife claims that Gary "has a new lease on life" after losing weight

("Season One Finale"). Kelly's family on the other hand, does not make any remark about Kelly's health improving as a result of losing weight. In fact, Kelly comes away from her time on the ranch with plantar fasciitis, a condition that her doctor says is from over-exercising and putting too much stress on her feet ("Season One Finale"). Whereas Ryan's and Gary's transformations are seen as most valuable because it was beneficial to their health, Kelly's transformation is seen as valuable because she is considered attractive as a result. Even though Kelly leaves *The Biggest Loser* with health problems that she did not have before entering the show, her transformation is considered worth it because she is more conventionally attractive and is able to find someone willing to date her after she loses weight.

After losing weight, Kelly is allowed to be more feminine and to be considered beautiful. At the beginning of the season, none of the contestants dress up or are made to look nice on camera. When she returns home from the ranch, Kelly has her hair and makeup done every time she is on camera, even in situations where she was exercising or wearing pajamas. This is done to dramatize Kelly's physical transformation on the show. Not only does Kelly go from fat to thin, but she also gets to be treated as pretty once she becomes thin. The assumption projected is that fat people do not care about their appearance, but thin people do, and are encouraged to take care of their appearance. Kelly is treated differently from the men in the competition because her weight is seen as an obstacle that prevents her from dating and from anyone considering her attractive. The last two men on the show were both married, and there was no mention of either of their wives finding their husbands to be unattractive because of their weight. However for Kelly, being

attractive is considered to be the only thing that she gains from the competition. By losing weight, Kelly is able to be considered attractive to men and go out on dates.

There is one scene in the finale episode that starkly contrasts the treatment of the contestants before their transformation to the contestants after their transformation. After returning home from the ranch, Ryan is talking to the camera about how difficult it is for him to lose weight while he does not have the influence of his trainer or a camera constantly following him as he did at the ranch. He talks about how he is tempted to eat "bad" food since there is no one monitoring what he eats. As he speaks about this, the scene shifts to show Ryan's casting tape for *The Biggest Loser*. It shows Ryan sitting in his car while eating a donut. Again, once Ryan is shown before losing weight, the scene changes to slow motion and zooms in on his mouth as he chews the food. This scene suggests that Ryan could easily go back to being fat like he was in the casting video if he continues to eat "bad" food. It also gives a stark contrast to the way that the contestants are treated once they are thin by placing the footage of Ryan's casting video alongside of footage of Ryan at his thinnest.

This particular scene clearly demonstrates the way that the contestants' transformations are viewed as a constant work in progress. Ryan's shame about eating the foods that he ate before he was on *The Biggest Loser* suggests that going back to any habits from his previous lifestyle will result in a relapse in his transformation. The show makes it seem as if the contestants slip back into their old ways for even just one meal, then they will ultimately end up fat again. This pressure to always be vigilant about diet and exercise promotes that the transformation is a constant battle and lifestyle change. This relates back to the way the trainers tell the contestants that they are going to teach them "how to live"

("Week One"). The trainer's job is not only to teach the contestants how to become thin, but to teach them how to maintain the lifestyle that will keep them thin. Although there is a clear "before" and "after" presented on the show, the transformation achieved on *The Biggest Loser* is actually never ending. The contestants must always be working toward the goal of losing weight, and even once they are thin, the fact that they were once fat always follows them. Even after the contestants lose weight, they are constantly reminded that they were once fat, and that being thin requires constant work to stay that way. The work that the contestants put forward to lose weight is never finished, because their bodies are a project that must continually be worked on. Although their transformation from fat to thin might visually appear to be complete once the show is over, the work is never really over for the contestants because their transformation is not only visual, but also a complete lifestyle change.

Research strongly suggests that not only losing weight, but maintaining weight loss as well is a constant struggle. Researchers from the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases facilitated a study on weight loss and metabolism that specifically tested contestants from *The Biggest Loser*. The study followed fourteen out of the sixteen contestants from *The Biggest Loser's* eighth season over the past six years. The contestant's body composition and resting metabolic heart rate were tested before beginning the show, at the conclusion of *The Biggest Loser*, and again six years after they left the show (Fothergill 1). Before beginning *The Biggest Loser*, the contestants' resting metabolism was tested; this measurement shows how many calories a person burns while the body is merely resting. The contestants' results to the testing showed that they all had normal metabolisms before beginning the show. This means that although the contestants

were medically classified as overweight or obese, their bodies burned a normal amount of calories for their size (Fothergill 6). After concluding the show, almost all of the contestants demonstrated a metabolic slow down. Their metabolisms had slowed down to the point that most of the contestants were unable to burn enough calories to maintain the weight that they reached while being on *The Biggest Loser* (Kolata). Out of fourteen of *The Biggest Loser* contestants studied, thirteen of them gained weight back after the competition. Only one contestant from that season weighed less than she did before being on the show. Four out of the fourteen contestants are actually heavier six years after the competition than they were before they lost weight on *The Biggest Loser*.

Although many people are aware that dieting slows down the metabolism temporarily, this study suggests that a metabolic slowdown can continue for years. The researchers saw that with *The Biggest Loser* contestants, even six years after their drastic weight loss, the contestants' metabolisms did not return to the rate where it was before they began the show (Kolata). Danny Cahill, the winner of the eighth season of *The Biggest Loser*, was one of the contestants whose metabolism was most dramatically affected from being on *The Biggest Loser*. He "regained more than 100 pounds, his metabolism slowed so much that, just to maintain his current weight of 295 pounds, he now has to eat 800 calories a day less than a typical man his size" (Kolata).

To maintain his weight loss from *The Biggest Loser*, Danny Cahill had to conduct a complete lifestyle change from where he was before being on the show. He even quit his job for a period of time in order to maintain the lifestyle that he had while living on *The Biggest Loser's* ranch in an attempt to keep the weight off. A day in the life after returning from *The Biggest Loser* looked like this for Danny Cahill:

Wake up at 5 a.m. and run on a treadmill for 45 minutes. Have breakfast — typically one egg and two egg whites, half a grapefruit and a piece of sprouted grain toast.

Run on the treadmill for another 45 minutes. Rest for 40 minutes; bike ride nine miles to a gym. Work out for two and a half hours. Shower, ride home, eat lunch — typically a grilled skinless chicken breast, a cup of broccoli and 10 spears of

asparagus. Rest for an hour. Drive to the gym for another round of exercise (Kolata).

Clearly, this level of dedication to weight loss is not sustainable or realistic for most people.

Although being on *The Biggest Loser* allows for the contestants to focus only on reshaping their bodies for the duration of the show, real life weight loss does not look like that without significant lifestyle restructuring. It is unrealistic to expect people to push away every important thing in their lives in order to control their weight. As seen with Danny Cahill, it can be next to impossible to maintain this level of weight loss without putting every other aspect of life, even his source of income, on the backburner. The show makes it seem as though once the contestants lose weight, the struggle will only be to eat relatively healthy and exercise regularly. However, the fact that almost every contestant on *The Biggest Loser* gains weight back demonstrates that there is more to keeping the weight off than just putting hard work into the process of losing weight and then maintaining it with simple lifestyle changes.

What this study of *The Biggest Loser* contestants reveals is that weight loss is always an uphill battle. After dedicating themselves to all the hard work that the contestants put forth on *The Biggest Loser*, most of them still are unable to keep off the weight that they lost on the show. The study demonstrates that weight gain for those who have lost a dramatic amount of weight is possibly inevitable. The drastic slowing of the metabolism that the

contestants experience shows that losing weight can result in even more problems for the contestants in the long run. This metabolic slow down coupled with the desire to lose weight creates a cyclical effect. Someone can desire to lose weight and do so, but at the cost of slowing down his or her metabolism. Slowing down the metabolism often times results needing to do more work in order to maintain previous weight loss. The researchers concluded their study by saying that "long-term weight loss requires vigilant combat against persistent metabolic adaptation that acts to proportionally counter ongoing efforts to reduce body weight" (Fothergill 7). There is obviously much more to the contestants' transformation than being taught "how to live" by the trainers. Clearly, the contestants can learn the lifestyle that the trainers promote, put work into losing weight, and still gain weight back.

The Biggest Loser promotes that being fat means someone has not put in the work in order to lose weight. Research now suggests that there is only so much that hard work can do if someone's metabolism slows down so dramatically after losing weight. While the show encourages the idea that anyone can transform themselves with enough hard work, *The Biggest Loser* does not depict the reality that hard work might not be enough in order to permanently lose weight. Even more than changing their lifestyles, the contestants need to be constantly vigilant about their weight loss in order to maintain their physical transformation.

In addition to the physical change that the contestants on *The Biggest Loser* go through, there is also a focus on the contestants' mental changes as well. During the introduction of the finale episode, there is a voiceover that claims, "they didn't just change their diets. They changed their lives" ("Season One Finale"). The show frames their weight

loss as a complete transformation of their bodies and attitudes. While on her way home from the ranch, Kelly from Season One remarks, "there's a part of me that's scared because this new Kelly has only existed on that ranch, and now I'm putting the new me back in the old world." She also refers to herself as "the new and improved Kelly" ("Season One Finale"). Although none of the contestants discuss in much detail how their personalities or attitudes have changed as a result of losing weight, the audience is expected to accept the idea that their physical change indicates a personal change as well. After losing weight, the contestants are treated like completely new people, rather than people who have undergone a purely physical transformation.

What Not to Wear

What Not to Wear is a television show that uses the makeover of a particular contestant in order to teach the audience what they should and should not wear. In *What Not to Wear*, each episode centers on a contestant who dresses in a nonconforming way. A friend or family member of the contestant sends in footage or photographs of this person's outfits in order to be considered as a contestant for the show. If chosen to be on the show, they are surprised by the show's hosts who take them on a shopping spree and teach them the kinds of clothes they believe that the contestant should wear. The caveat for the contestants is that they must give away all of their clothes that the stylists do not approve of in order to keep the clothes that the stylists select for them. Whether this person's outfits are considered unflattering for their body, or overly dramatic or bland according to the stylists, the goal is to make the contestant agree to conform to a particular style of dress. Additionally, the hosts offer style tips and tricks throughout the episode, using the

contestant as an example for the audience of how one should not dress, and offering suggestions in the way that they redress the contestant.

In Season 8, Episode 32 of *What Not to Wear*, the hosts focus their attention on a flight attendant named Denise. The stylists consider Denise's style before her makeover to be very flashy and outlandish, to the point where they say that her clothing is covering up her "real self." They describe Denise as a "bimbo" who uses clothes as a way to "play a character" and hide her real personality. One of the stylists tells Denise that he believes that she has "created this character...developed this role of Denise" ("Episode 32"). The stylists explicitly say that Denise did not know who she "really was," otherwise, she would not have been dressing in the way that she did before her makeover. For Denise's makeover, the stylists toss out all of Denise's clothing that they felt was too flashy or revealing. One stylist muses, "there might be a human being under all of that." Then they helped her select more demure outfits.

In *What Not to Wear*, the idea that a person's physical body can change the personality is very prevalent. Upon seeing Denise in her newly conservative outfits, the stylists mention that they can finally "see" the real Denise, and that her personality is visible once she changes into her new clothes. One stylist claims that they "can see how charming and goofy" Denise is once she changes her clothes. In this particular scene, Denise walks out in her new clothes for the first time, with more a subdued hairstyle and toned down makeup as well. Denise does not say anything to the stylists before they remark that they can finally "see" her personality. Additionally, before her makeover, the stylists had not mentioned that they believed Denise was "charming and goofy" at all. Their only remark about her personality before the makeover was that they thought she was hiding

her true self. Then once she reveals her new style, they decide that she has these personality traits. In this way, the stylists project their feelings about Denise's style onto her personality. Before her makeover she was not offered the freedom to define her own personality, but after her makeover she was "given" positive personality traits by the stylists.

Whereas *The Biggest Loser* implies that being fat is caused by a lack of willpower, *What Not to Wear* suggests that a poorly dressed body is caused by "a failure of self-esteem" (Sender 579). In Denise's makeover in *What Not to Wear*, she seems to have no problem with the way that she dresses, and she even remarks that she looks "cuter than [she] thought [she] was" when the stylists show Denise her casting footage ("Episode 32"). This footage is meant to make the contestants see their bodies the way that other people see them, and to make the contestants feel self-conscious about the way that they are perceived based on their clothing. In this way, the stylists embarrass the contestant into conforming to their preferred style. In Denise's case, she did not feel self-conscious about the way that she looked in the footage. In fact, she was pleased with the way that she looked. One stylist asked Denise if she was "really surprised" that she was selected to be on the show, to which she responded that she was indeed surprised ("Episode 32"). However, throughout the duration of the episode, the stylists seem to convince Denise that she was in fact using her fashion choices as a way to cover up her real personality because she had low self-esteem. By the end of the episode, Denise agrees that her old style was a result of her not knowing who she really was, and that her new style is more indicative of her "real" personality.

What Not to Wear promotes a fantasy that changing clothes can result in a complete mental and physical transformation. The show suggests that what is holding someone back from being the best version of his or herself is what he or she wears. The show also makes it seem as though this kind of personal transformation is within reach for everyone. The stylists act as though the advice they give the contestants is applicable and within reach for the audience members as well. What the stylists do not mention in the show is that the way a person dresses has much to do with how much money they are able and willing to spend on clothes. Someone who is not able to buy clothes at the shops promoted during the show is chastised for dressing the way that they do. The show fails to address that the way style and conformity are much easier to obtain for those who have the money to spend on clothes. While the contestant on the show is given money to spend on an entirely new wardrobe, not many other people are able to afford that luxury on a whim. In this way, *What Not to Wear* promotes a fantasy of upward mobility. Clothes can often be a very visual representation of someone's economic status. *What Not to Wear* suggests that changing from unstylish clothes to stylish clothes is as simple as learning what it takes to be fashionable. This is misleading because there is more that goes into what a person decides to wear than simply learning what to wear in order to appear fashionable. Someone who does not conform to what the show promotes as stylish may very likely not be able to afford the clothes that the stylists suggest for him or her. Still, this fact is not mentioned during the show—making it seem as though anyone who does not dress stylishly is simply ignorant of what it takes to look fashionable, rather than recognizing that many people cannot afford to dress the way that *What Not to Wear* suggests.

What Not to Wear contrasts with *The Biggest Loser* in that the personal transformation is something that happens to the person, rather than it being something that the person must work for. *What Not to Wear* takes the approach that in order to undergo a transformation, there must be some sort of intervention. A friend or family member, rather than the contestants themselves often nominate people selected to be on the show. In an episode of *What Not to Wear*, a contestant comes in clueless as to what is “wrong” with the way they dress and then they are whisked away by the stylists who show the contestant her “real” self behind the clothes that she previously chose to wear. This suggests that a physical change always indicates a mental change—that transforming oneself completely is as easy as changing clothes. This trivializes personal growth, and presents physical change as the only way that a person can truly change. This is harmful because it perpetuates the idea that others know what is best for another person, and that embarrassment and shame will lead to a beneficial lifestyle change. This attitude is not only visible in *What Not to Wear*, but in *The Biggest Loser* and *Extreme Makeover* as well.

Extreme Makeover

Extreme Makeover takes a physical transformation to the next level from *The Biggest Loser* and *What Not to Wear*. Contestants on the show often get plastic surgery, lose weight, and completely change their style. The purpose of *Extreme Makeover* is for the contestant to be essentially unrecognizable by the conclusion of the episode. For the duration of the show, contestants live in the “makeover mansion” away from their friends and family while they recover from surgery and get ready for the big reveal of their newly transformed self.

In Season Three of *Extreme Makeover*, the show introduces its youngest ever contestant, Katie Cox, who undergoes a big transformation. Katie is an eighteen-year-old girl who has a medical condition that causes a severe under bite, a condition that the host describes as “ruining her looks” (“Episode 18”). As the audience gets its first look at Katie, a voiceover states, “at the very age a girl matures into womanly beauty, Katie’s deformity makes her feel like an outcast” (“Episode 18”). There are several scenes in the episode that feature Katie’s mother, who discusses how Katie’s condition affects her health. She says that Katie “can’t break anything with her teeth...so it’s a choking hazard” (“Episode 18”). The voice of Katie’s mother contrasts with those of the doctors, stylists, and the show’s narrator. Katie’s mother is concerned for Katie’s health and wellbeing, but the other participants in the show fixate on Katie’s looks. Although Katie’s condition makes it difficult for her to chew food, which impacts her health, the main focus of the episode is how Katie’s jaw looks. The biggest part of Katie’s transformation on *Extreme Makeover* is that she undergoes a major surgery that realigns her jaw.

In addition to the jaw surgery, Katie also works with a personal trainer to lose weight, and with a team of stylists, who pick out new clothes for her, cut her hair, and teach her how to apply makeup. Upon meeting her for the first time, Katie’s trainer remarks, “this I can fix in no time” (“Episode 18”). Losing weight is seen as the first stepping-stone into her total transformation, something that can easily be “fixed.” She also goes to an eye doctor to get contact lenses, to an orthodontist who removes her braces, and a dermatologist who provides ways to treat Katie’s acne. Katie’s transformation is described by the show’s host as “a miracle” several times throughout the episode.

The overall tone of the episode is quite condescending towards Katie. The narrator shows no kindness in the way that he describes Katie before her extreme makeover. His tone of voice sounds full of pity when he describes Katie and her "deformity" before her makeover. When Katie tells the audience that she feels pretty after her experience on *Extreme Makeover*, the voiceover lists off the reasons "why Katie feels pretty," and then describes in detail all of the steps that Katie took during her extreme makeover. He describes Katie as "once disfigured, now jaw dropping" ("Episode 18").

Katie's mother is the only person featured in the show who talks about Katie in a kind way before her transformation. She does mention that she thinks that Katie believes that her "looks hold her back a little bit" ("Episode 18"). However, Katie's mother always talks about the way that Katie feels, rather than only focusing on her looks. Whereas one of Katie's doctors in the show states that Katie will be "an entirely different person" after she is finished with her makeover, Katie's mother says, "her personality is still there, she's just as sweet and kind and wonderful as she always has been" ("Episode 18"). Katie's mother's voice stands out amongst the other participants in the show because she genuinely cares about how Katie feels about her makeover, while the doctors, stylists, and host of *Extreme Makeover* only focus on the sensationalist aspect of Katie's transformation. The voice of Katie's mother is important in *Extreme Makeover* because without it, the show would more likely be seen as purely vain and about looks. However, having someone present on the show who cares about the feelings of the contestant changes the tone of the episode. Without Katie's mother's voice periodically reminding the audience that Katie is a real person, rather than just a spectacle, the audience would probably see the show as being too focused on outward appearances. Having a kind voice in the script allows for the audience

to feel better about the way Katie is treated by the host and those in charge of her makeover.

Although the contestants on the show go through much in order to complete their transformation, the show does not necessarily focus on what each person has to do in order to make that happen. Katie undergoes a very invasive jaw surgery, in which bones in her face were broken in order to shift her jaw back. While this is a major surgery that Katie has to recover from, the show glosses over the difficulty that a person would experience while recovering from this kind of surgery. Instead, the show makes it seem as though Katie is a passive participant in this “miracle” that makes her more conventionally attractive. The show plays up exactly how much Katie had to change in order to be completely transformed, but not the negative impacts that these changes would have had on her. Not only did Katie have surgery, but she also had a new exercise routine, clothes, haircut, and makeup in order to make her transformation complete. Although the show points out how much Katie had to have done in order to be considered conventionally pretty, it does not give much credit to Katie for her role in the transformation. Instead, *Extreme Makeover* focuses on the doctors, trainers, and stylists who help the contestants navigate their transformation. Rather than focusing on how much the contestant goes through to transform, the show makes it seem as though it is the outside influence of the professionals that really deserves credit for creating a “miracle.” The show’s host furthers this idea of the makeover being a miracle by calling the show a place “where dreams really do come true” (“Episode 18”).

While *The Biggest Loser*, *What Not to Wear*, and *Extreme Makeover* all center on the physical transformation of the participants, they each frame the transformation in a

different way. *The Biggest Loser* focuses on the personal hard work that goes into undergoing such a dramatic transformation. In this show, the contestants put every ounce of their energy into losing weight, and their subsequent weight-loss (or lack thereof) is related to how much work they were willing to put into losing weight. *The Biggest Loser* promotes the narrative that transformation is difficult, but is always possible if enough effort is put forth. *What Not to Wear* has a different approach. In this show, a complete transformation is easy—all people have to do to change their lives is make up their mind that they want to change, then change their clothes. *What Not to Wear* gives the impression that change is something that *happens* to someone rather than something that someone needs to constantly work toward. *Extreme Makeover*'s approach lies somewhere in the middle: the transformation happens as a result of the efforts of a team of plastic surgeons, makeup artists, personal trainers, and stylists while the participant lets it happen. It focuses on the process of the transformation, but not what the participant really goes through in order to be completely transformed.

Implications of "Transformation Culture" Presented in Reality TV

A major problem with makeover television is that reality television is inherently exploitative to the people on screen. Because the shows are centered on "fixing" aspects of a person that are stigmatized, these shows further perpetuate the negative stereotypes associated with those aspects. *The Biggest Loser*, *What Not to Wear*, and *Extreme Makeover* all exploit the contestants on their shows by taking the agency away from the contestants and inviting the viewers to stare at them. In her article, "The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography," Rosemarie Garland-Thomson discusses

the use of photographs of people with disabilities to push a rhetorical agenda, one that backfires against people with disabilities. She writes, "staring... choreographs a visual relation between a spectator and a spectacle. A more intense form of looking than glancing, glimpsing, scanning, surveying, gazing, and other forms of casual or uninterested looking, staring registers the perception of difference and gives meaning to impairment by marking it as aberrant" (56). Although Garland-Thomson is specifically discussing people with physical disability, her argument holds true for anyone with a physical difference that could be stared at. Likewise, Garland-Thomson discusses staring at photographs, but television programs can present the same problems as photographs do. As with the subject of a photograph, people on a television show are meant to be looked at. These depictions give the viewer permission to stare at the subject, while they take away the responsibility to be polite that a viewer might normally feel to the person that they are staring at. Because there is no face-to-face interaction taking place, the viewer is allowed to stare intensely, which he or she might otherwise feel uncomfortable doing so. (Garland-Thomson 58). Although many people today might avoid staring at others in public to avoid seeming rude, reality television gives people the opportunity to stare at someone without feeling guilt or facing social repercussions. Instead, the viewers are allowed to stare at others within the comfort of their own living rooms, while maintaining the façade of not staring.

While eliminating stigma is often the goal of the transformation for the contestants, reality television shows actually further perpetuate these stigmas. Many contestants on the shows often mention that societal pressure and wanting to fit in with others are the reason that they desire to change. Giving viewers an outlet to stare at those being stigmatized however, hands the power to the viewers and the producers rather than the contestants.

The producers have the ability to present the contestants however they want them to be perceived, and the viewers have permission to stare at the contestants without social repercussions. Even though contestants in reality television shows are on the show of their own accord, they do not always have control over the way that they are portrayed on screen. Contestants can speak as they wish, but what they say may be edited or taken out of context. Additionally, the contestants have no control over the way the way that the footage is manipulated in order to fit into the overarching narrative of the show. Instead of giving the stigmatized individuals an outlet to tell their stories, makeover television shows only promote ways in which someone can change in order to eliminate the stigmatizing condition. This makes it seem as though the only acceptable response to a physical difference is to attempt to change it, rather than accept it. By creating an outlet for viewers to be entertained by someone else's ostracization, reality television turns the stigmatized individual into a spectacle rather than a relatable human being.

With their focus on the "before" and "after" aspect of the transformation, makeover television shows promote the idea that there is a "true self" that is held back by being fat or poorly dressed. Someone who looks like a "before" is constantly in a "transitory state" according to the narrative of self-transformation (Roost 175). *The Biggest Loser*, *What Not to Wear*, and *Extreme Makeover* all support the notion that someone's body is in a state of pre-transformation until he or she looks like an "after" photo. This attitude reaffirms the idea that others know what is best for someone else, which in turn justifies "the stigmatization as a motivation for presumably healthy change" (Roost 175). These television shows further perpetuate the idea that those with "before" bodies need to be told how to change for their own good. With this guise of concern for the contestants' health

and well-being, the audience does not feel guilty about the objectification or stigmatization of the contestants. They believe that the people on the shows not only deserve to be treated poorly, but that they ultimately benefit from it because the professionals in each show know better than the contestants. Even if the guise of concern is not necessarily about the contestants' health, the audience believes that the transformation is for the contestants' own good. For example, the audience is meant to believe that Denise from *What Not to Wear* will benefit from changing her clothes so that others will take her seriously and that she will be able to truly be herself. This idea is misleading because it suggests that people deserve to be mistreated for not conforming to society's ideal, and that this mistreatment is actually benefiting them in the long run.

The contestants on the shows are meant to starkly contrast with the professionals on the show who guide the contestants through their transformation. In *The Biggest Loser*, these are the trainers, in *What Not to Wear*, the stylists, and in *Extreme Makeover*, they are the team of trainers, doctors, and stylists. Someone who is closer to the ideal body than the contestant always supervises the contestant's transformation. In this way, the audience trusts the professionals because they already represent an "after" body in comparison to the contestant's "before" body. Fitting in with the narrative of makeover reality television shows, these professionals have the authority to tell the contestants how to change because they know what is best for the contestants.

Although viewers can believe that the representation of the contestants is unfair or malicious, many still take away the idea that the humiliation of the contestants was necessary in order for them to lose weight. In the article, "Epidemics of Will, Failures of Self-Esteem: Responding to Fat Bodies in *The Biggest Loser* and *What Not to Wear*"

researchers Katherine Sender and Margaret Sullivan remark on the viewers' perception of fat bodies in *The Biggest Loser* and *What Not to Wear*. They collected responses to both shows from regular viewers and fans of the shows, as well as from people who did not watch the shows or consider themselves fans. An interviewee from the study remarked, "I suppose it really helps [in losing weight] to have yourself on camera in those ridiculous little, tight outfits they have them wear when they're weighing in" (578). The fact that the viewers believe that the humiliation aspect of the show is beneficial to the contestants demonstrates that the audience is not able to fully distance itself from the anti-fat narrative that *The Biggest Loser* presents. Some respondents from the interviews do mention that they believe that the contestants on the show are painted in an unflattering light. They determined that "even viewers who consider themselves fans critique [*The Biggest Loser*] for narrow and unkind representations, and for inadequate or bad advice" (Sender 573). One fan of the show remarked:

I always thought it was weird that they put these people on *The Biggest Loser* in what I would consider somewhat skimpy outfits. I wouldn't even feel comfortable wearing those, and I'm a normal-weight person. Like they have the women in these sports bras and little shorts so their stomachs are hanging out, and they have the men take their shirts off to get weighed. And they're just these little flimsy shirts, so why would they make them take off their shirts? I felt like it was a sensationalism aspect to go, 'Look at how fat these people are.'" (Sender 578)

Even though the audience may feel uncomfortable with the way the contestants are treated at times, they still believe that a fat body "represents the failure of a will in a culture in which self-direction and choice are paramount" (Sender 582). While the viewers may feel

sympathetic towards the contestants that are treated in a dehumanizing manner, the audience still takes away the show's sentiment that the contestants on the show deserve their mistreatment. Additionally, the contestants are seen as not only deserving the mistreatment, but that it is actually necessary and beneficial for them.

It is important to note that makeover television shows are not only a symptom of our cultural stigmatization of people who are physically different, but also that it further perpetuates these stereotypes to those who watch it. In a stimulus-response type study done by Jina Yoo from Washington University in St. Louis, it was suggested that individuals who have a high concern about their weight were more likely to watch *The Biggest Loser* than people who were not concerned with their weight. Additionally, people who watched more episodes of *The Biggest Loser* had a greater perceived locus of control over their body weight (Yoo 295). This means that people who regularly watch *The Biggest Loser* are more likely to believe that people have more control over their weight, rather than attributing a person's weight to factors outside of personal control. It was also shown that those with a greater perceived locus of weight control were more likely to attribute fatness as a personal responsibility and to have anti-fat attitudes (Yoo 294). The attribution of responsibility for someone's condition has a large role in determining whether or not a person has negative feelings about that person and their stigmatizing condition. This demonstrates that television shows such as *The Biggest Loser* can influence negative attitudes that are already widespread in our society.

In addition to the personal implications that the desire for transformation has on an individual, this quest for transformation also makes for a society of good consumers. There are countless dieting gimmicks that all purport to be the only thing needed in order for

someone to lose weight for good. Diet foods, drugs, books, and gadgets all make up a multi-million dollar industry that profits from Americans believing that they have the power to lose weight (Schwartz 250). However, if one thinks about the ever-expanding market for diet products, it is clear to see that dieting, in most cases, does not even work. If all someone needed in order to lose weight for good were enough willpower and a diet, then there would be no market for so many diet products. However, Americans literally buy into the idea that if they are not able to transform their bodies, they are not doing enough in order to make the change happen. One contestant from *The Biggest Loser* notes the cyclical nature of losing weight in the pilot episode. "What's great about being overweight," he says, "is that we all know how to lose weight." ("Week One"). Even participants of the shows who have experienced firsthand that permanent weight loss is often a fantasy, buy into the idea that they are the problem, rather than accepting that drastic physical change is often not possible or sustainable.

Sustainable weight loss is not the only unrealistic expectation that makeover reality television shows gloss over. These shows make it seem as though self-transformation is possible if someone wants it bad enough. However, there are quite often restrictions on what is possible for a person to attain when it comes to personal transformation. In the case of both *What Not to Wear* and *Extreme Makeover*, money plays a large factor in what a person could reasonably hope to achieve in regards to a physical transformation. *What Not to Wear* seems to chastise those who dress poorly according to the stylists, when in reality the contestants' fashion choices could quite reasonably be restricted because they do not have the money to buy clothes at the boutiques that the stylists suggest. Being considered well-dressed is very much connected to how much money a person is willing and able to

spend on clothing in order to be perceived that way. Likewise, *Extreme Makeover* suggests many different ways that a person could change his or herself, but these changes too are very often out of reach for those who do not have the money to afford plastic surgery, personal trainers, and a personal stylist. This quest for self-transformation turns into a fantasy for those who do not have the means to pay for the type of transformation that these shows encourage. Although someone may not be held back from transforming his or her body because it is physically impossible or because of a lack of willpower, he or she may still be unable to attain the ideal that these shows project because it is financially out of reach.

Makeover reality television shows also project the idea that consumption is a form of self-love. This is more often than not an idea that is directed towards women rather than men as well. In the case of *What Not to Wear*, the transformation is more concerned with addressing the contestants' self-esteem issues. Being poorly dressed, according to the show's stylists, is a result of having poor self-esteem. The show takes this desire for self-improvement and directs it toward consumption. "The show's emphasis on self-improvement through 'good' forms of consumption is couched as an obligation for women to care for the self, so no one else has to" (Sender 581). Putting forth effort and money into self-improvement is seen as obligatory for women to be taken seriously. Buying clothes and looking attractive is seen as indicative of the way a woman feels about herself. If a woman dresses in a way that is seen as typically unflattering, it is because she has self-esteem issues that keep her from allowing the world to see her at her full potential. Makeover television shows promote the idea that people should constantly be working to improve themselves, and this self-improvement comes with a price tag. *What Not to Wear* suggests

that self-improvement means self-acceptance, yet the self-acceptance that the show promotes is actually conformity through consumption (Sender 582). Contestants are not seen as though they have self-esteem until they agree to conform to what the stylists believe they should wear. Outside of the television show, this conformity would result from putting a significant amount of money into clothes and makeup. Not everyone has the means to put money into his or her appearance the way that *What Not to Wear* suggests. Even still, the show makes it seem as though those who do not put money into their appearance are avoiding doing so because they have poor self-esteem. This attitude makes for good consumers in our culture because the idea that one cannot be taken seriously without spending money to look attractive is prevalent. It leads to people putting money into changing how they look in order to be perceived as though they have high self-esteem.

Additionally, the quest for self-transformation is, in general, more often projected at women rather than men. As was seen in with Kelly from Season One in *The Biggest Loser* finale, she is portrayed as undesirable until she loses weight, in comparison with the men on the show, whose weight does not get in the way of them having romantic relationships. Once Kelly loses weight, it is as though she finally has permission to embrace her femininity by wearing makeup and more feminine clothing. This is looked at as something impossible to do before Kelly loses the weight. Similarly, Katie from *Extreme Makeover* is seen as being on the cusp of womanhood, yet her looks before her makeover were holding her back from becoming a real woman. The show presents Katie's makeover as not only taking her from unattractive to beautiful, but from a girl into a woman. These shows suggest that a woman's identity is wrapped up in whether or not she is conventionally attractive. Before their makeovers, Kelly and Katie were both seen as being less than women—Kelly was looked at

as undesirable because she was fat, and Katie was seen as still being a child until her makeover turned her conventionally attractive. Denise, meanwhile, was seen as being over the top with her very feminine and flashy clothing. When Denise puts her new clothes on, the stylists comment on how her personality was hidden beneath her flashy outfits. For each of the women, conformity brought them back inside the socially constructed idea for what it means to be a woman. This differs from the men in reality television because their masculinity is not called into question the way that a woman's femininity is. For men, the pressure to conform is much less about fulfilling a gender role than it is for women. Although the men in *The Biggest Loser* are stigmatized for being fat, being fat does not pull them outside of their gender role the way it does for the women.

After their makeovers, all of the women seem to embrace their femininity. It is as though their transformations changed not only their bodies, but their social roles as women as well. This quest for transformation adds another force of pressure to women in American culture. For women, transformation is needed in order to be taken seriously as a woman. Before conforming to society's standards of beauty, a woman does not even properly fit into her social role as a woman. Once a woman transforms her body though, it is as though there has been a part of her that has desired to fit into this role forever. While Katie and Kelly are seen as undesirable because they had not been doing enough to fit into this role, Denise is chastised because she was seen as doing too much with her appearance. While conformity into a woman's social role is important to all of their transformations, Denise is looked at negatively for being hyper-feminine rather than unfeminine to begin with. This critique of Denise's style is what causes the stylists to see her as a "bimbo." For women to conform in American culture, there is a hard line to walk in this regard. Being

perceived as not caring enough about one's appearance pushes someone outside of the social role as a woman, but so does seeming to care too much. Although the women from *The Biggest Loser*, *What Not to Wear*, and *Extreme Makeover* are all looked down on for not properly filling their roles as women, the pressure is never alleviated for them even once they transform. Once the contestants go through their transformations, they are expected to maintain their newly achieved role. This pressure never really goes away even after the contestants conform because fitting into this role is something that takes constant care.

Conclusion

The quest for personal transformation has become so ingrained in our society that it seems in poor taste to even question it. After all, who is going to argue with someone who is attempting to make himself or herself better? However, this desire for personal transformation has created a society in which those who are seen as "pre-transformed" are somehow less than those who already conform to our culture's norms of what is physically attractive. People who are thought to look like the "before" photos of reality television are shamed into conformity. Although it may seem as though most people are striving to become a better version of themselves, the kind of transformation that makeover television promotes is more insidious in nature because it encourages viewers to shame and stigmatize those who look like the contestants in the shows before the makeover is complete.

This leads to the question, what really defines self-improvement? How do we define what makes a person better? Makeover television shows promote that the only way to make oneself better is to conform to what society has created as the ideal body. Losing

weight, wearing nice clothes, and being conventionally attractive are all ways that these shows suggest that people make themselves better. Not only do the people that undergo this physical transformation look better according to the experts on the shows, but also they emerge from the transformation with a more positive attitude and better self-esteem. However, it is the television shows that promote this concept—not necessarily reality. Not only are these shows a symptom of our cultural expectation for constant self-improvement, they actively promote this idea. Makeover reality television shows like *The Biggest Loser*, *What Not to Wear* and *Extreme Makeover* all teach the audience what self-improvement and valuable personal transformation should look like—and the audience is supposed to accept these ideas without thought.

Television has the potential to either break down stereotypes and stigma or to reinforce it. It is possible for television to encourage the audience to empathize with those on screen rather than to stigmatize them; however, makeover television shows do not do that. *The Biggest Loser*, *What Not to Wear*, and *Extreme Makeover* all reinforce negative beliefs about physical difference rather than bring those beliefs into question. These shows encourage the audience to hold on to negative stereotypes by manipulating their thinking. The overarching narrative of these shows is that there are always ways to improve oneself, and that people deserve to be stigmatized if they are complacent rather than striving to change whatever it is that society deems unacceptable.

It is important to conclude by mentioning that not all transformation is bad, and that the desire for self-improvement can often be a healthy thing. No one can be expected to stay the same forever. However, the quest for self-improvement should be a personal journey, not something that one is manipulated into by television shows that profit off of

the exploitation of others. There is a difference between wanting to change something about oneself for personal growth and happiness, and feeling forced to change because society and popular entertainment demand change and personal transformation. Makeover reality television shows do not encourage thoughtful growth and change. Rather, they put pressure on those who do not conform to society's ideal, and encourage people to change without carefully considering why.

If someone wants to change something about his or herself, they should feel free to do so, but no one should feel shamed into changing his or her body. Instead we should strive to be more accepting of others regardless of whether or not their bodies fit into our socially constructed ideas of what is normal and attractive. Makeover reality television shows do quite the opposite of this because they do not challenge the stigma; rather, they reinforce the negative stereotypes that our culture has placed upon people who do not conform to the societal norm. Although American culture drives forward the idea that anyone can change anything about himself or herself with enough hard work, or with an outside intervention, we can see that this is not always the case. Additionally, even if someone is able change him or herself and undergo a transformation as we have seen in *The Biggest Loser*, *What Not to Wear*, and *Extreme Makeover*, we should not demand that others change in order to fit into this mold. Although it may be impossible to completely avoid media that promotes transformation in this way, we do not have to accept what it is teaching us or actively perpetuate these stereotypes ourselves.

While there is the possibility of the "rags to riches" kind of story in everyone's life, we should not accept this narrative without question. The only way that we will be able to fight against the stigma and negative stereotypes that surround those who do not conform

is to question the influence of our popular media, like *The Biggest Loser*, *What Not to Wear*, and *Extreme Makeover*. While the American Dream suggests that we can and should always be striving to become a better version of ourselves, makeover reality television shows warp this deeply held belief into a quest for physical transformation and conformity. Instead, we should be striving to better ourselves in ways that we value, and choose to change ourselves accordingly.

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